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ABSTRACT

Louisiana's statewide provisions for education of gifted and talented preschoolers are reviewed, and difficulties encountered in serving 300 gifted young children are addressed. Among the administrative burdens cited are narrow identification criteria and the combination of limited financial and personnel resources resulting in the availability of only several program prototypes. Nine suggestions are offered to other states attempting to institutionalize statewide programing for gifted preschoolers, including design of a comprehensive plan for gifted education, establishment of an effective support group, pilot testing of a variety of delivery systems, provision of adequate teacher training, involvement of principals and school support personnel, and design of a system to track children through gifted programs. (CL)

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PROVIDING PROGRAMS FOR PRESCHOOL GIFTED CHILDREN ON A STATEWIDE BASIS

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Louisiana's commitment to education for the gifted and talented has earned the attention of other American states and of leaders in this field, who recognize of the historical "age" of that commitment and the comprehensiveness of planning for gifted students and their teachers.

As early as 1950, "mentally gifted" children were named in State law as one group of students needing special educational services in order to "profit from public school programs." At this time, State monies were set aside to reimburse local school systems for expenses incurred in providing appropriate programming for gifted students. This legislation was reenacted and reinforced through subsequent laws in 1960, 1964, 1972 and 1977. The legislation currently in effect, Act 754 of 1977, stipulates that all gifted and talented children, between the ages of 3 and 21, must be provided with a "program of special education and related services [which makes] the most effective use of human and fiscal resources."

Statistical estimates predict that 17,000 to 18,000 students in Louisiana are gifted or talented. Currently 11,000 students have been identified and are receiving services. Programs are in operation in 64 of 66 parish schools systems and employ more than 650 special education teachers for the gifted. Students receive an average of five hours per week of differentiated instruction, most often provided through resource room settings or by itinerant teachers. Computer logic pervades most programming, due largely to the efforts of Ruth Castille of the State Department of Education.

Continuous teacher training is a hallmark of Louisiana provisions for gifted education. Larger parishes are funded by the state to employ full-time program coordinators to supervise teachers of the gifted or the

talented and to coordinate ongoing staff development. The remaining parishes receive stipends earmarked for teacher education, so that teachers are able to travel to workshops and meetings held throughout the State.

Approximately three percent of gifted students in Louisiana fall within the preschool bracket of ages three, four and five. (Kindergarten is considered a preschool year for administrative purposes.) During the 1982-83 school term, 280 preschoolers received gifted education services. Statistical predictions based upon new identification criteria indicate that this number is not expected to exceed 300. Although programming for 300 children would appear to be fairly manageable, in fact there are several administrative elements which have placed unusual demands upon those responsible for the provision of programs.

1) Louisiana Act 754 requires that any child suspected of possessing traits of giftedness must:
   a) be screened, then individually evaluated by a multi-disciplinary team of psychologists and educators within 60 school days after referral;
   b) be provided with an Individual Educational Plan designed specifically to address his or her unique strengths and needs;
   c) be placed in the most appropriate educational setting within 40 school days after the evaluation process is completed;
   d) be provided with a differentiated instructional curriculum by a teacher certified in gifted education; and
   e) be re-evaluated every three years for continued placement and appropriate services.

These regulations leave relatively little room for experimentation or for field testing of curricula, since requests for a variety of

individualized programs must, by law, be responded to immediately. Because there is no "best" educational model for this population, administrators must attempt to provide as many placement alternatives as are fiscally and programmatically feasible to serve the needs of gifted preschoolers within each parish.

2) The identification criteria for gifted programs in Grades One through Twelve comprise a matrix upon which a student must achieve an IQ score 2½ standard deviations above the mean, or an IQ score 2 standard deviations above the mean in addition to above average (+1 SD) achievement in reading and/or math. However, the identification criteria for preschool gifted children are much more narrow. These children must achieve an IQ score 3 standard deviations above the mean, or an IQ score 2½ standard deviations above the mean with outstanding (+2 SD) achievement in reading and math. Since measurement of reading and math achievement at the preschool level is difficult, this often limits identification to those children with intellectual abilities three standard deviations above those of their age peers.

Identification criteria for preschoolers that are more narrow than those used for older students were established for the following reasons:

a) Children at the extreme end of the intellectual spectrum are considered to be at greater risk for school adjustment difficulties than those who fall into the "bright" category (IQ 130-145). These "at risk" children are noticeably different from their preschool age peers, and they are, for the most part, aware of being different. Unlike most bright children who often stimulate and reinforce primary grade teachers, the more "severely and profoundly gifted" child can threaten or disrupt a regular teacher's plans. Rather than waiting for problems to appear, it is hoped that good preschool programs can imprint gifted children with the attitudes and skills they will need to counter adverse pressures to behave in a

manner similar to average students. To some extent, preschool programs can give students the tools they will use to adapt regular education programs to their individual needs throughout their school careers.

b) If the current identification criteria used for first through twelfth graders are applied to preschool children in Louisiana, more than 4400 preschoolers would be eligible for gifted education. The establishment of programs for this many students would increase the gifted population rolls by 40%, but would have to be funded from a state allotment which has remained fixed for the past several years. Not only would fiscal, space, and equipment restraints intervene here, but personnel demands would be impossible to meet. Currently there are few teachers who have certification or adequate background in both the developmental needs of preschool children and the instructional/curricular needs of gifted students.

c) To a large extent, programs for preschool gifted children are still exploratory, albeit within the constraints of mandatory special education. In order to develop appropriate curriculum and teaching strategies, in order to divine "best practices", it is considered cautious to test innovative ideas upon a small subgroup of the gifted population, rather than with 4400 children. Children in the 145+ range of intellectual potential require a much different type of educational program than do above average or bright students. It has been noticed that teachers, including those in classes of preschool children with IQ's ranging from 123 to above 160, tend to "teach to" the lower end of the group. To some extent, this phenomenon is a result of most preschool teachers having come from the field of early education rather than from the field of gifted education.

d) Finally, parents of "average" preschool children have been quick to point out that in Louisiana free public education is provided to three- and

four-year-old handicapped children and to three- and four-year-old gifted children, but not to the large group of average preschool children. If programs are focused to serve only those students at greatest risk, gifted education becomes clearly discernible from that which is appropriate for all preschoolers. Instruction that is sufficiently differentiated can only be created within an environment made up of students who are at extreme in both potential and need.

3) Service delivery models for preschool gifted programs in Louisiana run the gamut from early school entrance to home-based parent training and the provision of literature. Eight placement or service prototypes have been detailed for local school systems use and these will be described below. However, the combination of limited financial and personnel resources with the legal mandate for individual educational programming has resulted in many parishes being able to provide only one or two delivery systems.

a) Kindergarten classes with resource/itinerant services is a placement designed for five-year-olds in regular kindergarten programs who receive part-time, pull-out gifted education. A large school may employ a resource room teacher who sees kindergarten children for one to 2½ hours per day, separately or in groups with first and second graders. Smaller schools may use an intinerant teacher who meets with gifted students, alone or in small groups, every day or twice a week.

b) Self-contained kindergarten classes are limited to identified gifted five-year-olds and may meet for half days or full days, five days a week. These classes often employ teacher aides as well.

c) Self-contained preschool classes are set up for gifted children three or four years of age. Although programs in various parishes have met for one full day per week, for five full days per week, or for five half days per week, preliminary evaluations indicate that five morning sessions

of three to four hours per day is probably the most productive scheduling design.

d) Early school entrance with support services is appropriate for those children who are intellectually and socially ready for kindergarten or first grade one year before the standard entrance age. Since regular meetings with a special education teacher are not included, this setting is best limited to mature children who can perform at or above the average level of students in the grade entered.

e) Early entrance with resource/itinerant services is appropriate for children who are ready for kindergarten or first grade early, but who also need the regular services of a teacher trained in gifted education in order to adjust to the new environment. This teacher would continue to adapt the regular school program to each child's special needs throughout the school year. Although virtually every research study investigating the effect of early entrance upon social and emotional well-being has shown no long-term ill effects, tremendous prejudice against this form of educational adjustment still exists among teachers, parents and administrators. Continued efforts are being made to convince educators that thoughtfully planned acceleration is often the best solution to an individual child's need to stretch and to remain appropriately challenged.

f) Non-categorical preschool classes are those established for three-and four-year-olds with mild to moderate physical, intellectual, or emotional handicaps. In rural parishes, the trial placement of preschool gifted children into non-categorical classes has been found to be a viable alternative to low incidence gifted classes, and teachers have been pleased to accommodate gifted children by designing curricula specific to their needs. Because these teachers come from the field of early childhood education for the handicapped, they are particularly adept at program individualization.

g) Home-based education is the provision of special instruction for one to three hours per week within an individual home. A teacher trained in gifted education provides appropriate materials for the child, and may model instructional strategies for parents.

h) Parent training programs are undergoing extensive planning in Louisiana. One model describes regular meetings for parents of the gifted during which topics such as motivation, emotional development, and discipline are addressed. Another design includes direct instruction to small groups of children while parents observe. The former would likely be led by a school social worker, the latter by a teacher of the gifted. These parent training programs are being piloted over the next school year to determine the efficacy of more extensive use throughout Louisiana.

Institutionalization of statewide programming for gifted preschool children is not accomplished easily. Efforts in Louisiana have matured through a multi-phase planning process which administrators are eager to share so that other states may benefit from what has been learned. Below is a nine-point guide which others may find helpful.

(1) Design a comprehensive plan for gifted education.

In the early 1970's, when gifted education was first being discussed in Louisiana, a formal State Plan was developed by a group of teachers, parents, and administrators. Later, the National/State Leadership Training Institute on the Gifted and the Talented was contracted to provide comprehensive training over a three-year period. Each school district named a task force made up of one teacher, one parent, and one administrator. These teams were brought together for three-day meetings seven times between 1976 and 1978. Sessions were led by nationally recognized leaders in the field of gifted education on topics such as identification, curriculum development, creativity, inservice training,

parent involvement, affective needs, program administration, and program evaluation. Emphasis was placed on the development of written plans for gifted education in each parish. Consultants from N/S-LTI-G/T reviewed each team's written plan through various phases until the plans were completed. This allowed team members to present formal guidelines to their local school boards during the initiation of programming for the gifted. Thus, programs for the gifted in Louisiana had agreed-upon goals before they were put into place. When services for preschool-aged gifted students were initiated, they dove-tailed easily into existing programs for gifted students in grades one through twelve.

(2) Build an effective support group.

Parents have been included in the development of gifted programs in Louisiana from the outset. In the training phase described above, parents from each parish exercised full status and responsibility in determining the direction gifted education would take within local school systems. The Association for Gifted and Talented Students was founded in 1973 as an organization through which parents could act as advocates to assure that appropriate educational experiences would be provided for their children. This organization has grown exponentially; there are now 40 chapters throughout the State. The Association circulates an attractive newsletter to 10,000 parents and conducts an annual convention which draws over 800 adults and 700 students.

(3) Seek the regulatory protection of special education.

Gifted students have been included as a population in legislation for exceptional children since 1950. This inclusion has proven to be extremely beneficial in establishing programs throughout the State. Not only do gifted students enjoy the legal protection of mandatory service regulations, but State financial support is easier to obtain as well. It is doubtful that adequate and appropriate programming would pervade Louisiana had gifted education not been a viable part of special education.

(4) Describe and pilot a variety of delivery systems.

Because local school district administrators rarely have training in preschool gifted education, it is not uncommon for them to hesitate when faced with the initiation of programs for this group. Due to lack of information, many do not realize the variety of ways in which the needs of preschool gifted children can be met. Once local administrators in Louisiana were presented with descriptions of the eight program models identified above, they were better able to decide which types of services they could offer. Pupil appraisal personnel also were concerned about the assessment of giftedness among young hcildren; when identification criteria were revised, they were more comfortable nominating children. (Preschool through third grade students in Louisiana are called "High Potential.")

(5) Obtain adequate training for teachers of the preschool gifted.

Certification for teachers of gifted preschool children presents unique difficulties. The Department of Education held a panel discussion with members of the governing board of the National Association for Gifted Children and found much disagreement concerning whether certification in gifted education or certification in early childhood education was most appropriate for teachers in these classes. After careful consideration, it was decided that teachers holding either certification would be allowed to teach preschool gifted children, but that each must work toward obtaining background in the area in which they were untrained. To fill the gap projected while teachers were completing supplemental training, several inservice meetings were held. Consultants from Washington, Colorado, and Texas were contracted to help teachers plan curriculum. In addition, teachers were provided with books and articles related to the group they would teach, and were encouraged to meet together frequently.

(6) Introduce the concept to parent and community groups.

Parents of preschool gifted children in Louisiana were delighted that special education programs are provided for these students, but many lacked clear understanding of what to expect from their schools and their children. A school social worker with expertise in preschool gifted education provided a series of well-attended workshops in which characteristics and potential problems of the children were addressed. Also, efforts were made to explain to community groups the rationale behind tightening identification criteria for young gifted children.

(7) Involve principals and school support personnel.

It is essential to involve school principals when establishing new programs for preschool gifted children, as these programs present special logistical demands and a new concept to regular school faculties. Programs that draw a different group of children each day of the week or programs that are held for half-day sessions require adaptations in bus, lunch, and duty schedules. More importantly, classes with teacher aides and with reduced numbers of children often generate misconceptions that teaching these programs is somehow easier than teaching in a regular classroom. Although teachers in gifted education have traditionally assumed roles as advocates and defenders of gifted programs, greater acceptance can be assured if principals are supportive from the start.

(8) Devise a system to track children through gifted programs.

Programs for gifted preschoolers are initiated without the luxury of a research base that predicts their success. However, the only way to establish empirical evidence of effectiveness is to attempt programming and to follow children closely as they enter elementary school. After a period of five years, children who participated in preschool programs will

be reevaluated to determine whether or not the exceptionalities they demonstrated at early ages were maintained. At this time, the group will also be compared to gifted students who did not participate in preschool special education programs. Finally, children who enrolled in different types of preschool gifted programs will be compared to investigate the relative effects of each model.

(9) Reevaluate and revise programs appropriately.

Upon completion of the research studies described above, gifted preschool programs probably will need to be revised and improved. However, choice of service options will remain a local decision based upon the individual student's characteristics. Like all states, Louisiana is made up of a variety of school systems with diverse needs and resources; these factors must certainly be considered in providing programs for gifted preschool children.

Louisiana has assumed tremendous responsibility through the inclusion of preschool-aged gifted children in the population of students for whom special educational services must be provided. Although there are a handful of research and demonstration centers for preschool gifted education in the United States, this is the first state to have planned comprehensive programming for urban and rural, advantaged and disadvantaged public school students in every district. With few guides to follow, we must rely on thoughtful administrative planning, dedicated and flexible teaching, and sincere public support in order to best serve this very special group of gifted learners.